

Executive Summary

>>> Plumbing Apprenticeships: Drivers & Impediments

Industry Pathfinder Project



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And finally, we are indebted to the steering committee - a dedicated group from across Australia and New Zealand. This group, in particular, was instrumental in distributing surveys and making contact through their networks to encourage responses.



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Steering Committee¹

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¹ The following were invited to join the Project Steering Committee but chose not to be involved: Paul Brady (TAFE NSW), Gary Workman (MPA-Victoria).



Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to identify the drivers and critical impediments to the uptake of Australian Apprenticeships in plumbing and related services. Of specific interest to this report is the issue of flexibility of plumbing training delivery.

The primary focus for this report has been on the experience and perceptions of current plumbing apprentices. Whilst this may not always highlight some of the structural impediments identified in previous reports², it does provide a 'customer centred' perspective that highlights issues that are most pertinent to those considering a plumbing apprenticeship.

Surveys were conducted with current plumbing apprentices, employers and plumbing instructors across Australia and New Zealand. The surveys explored the following topics:

- why individuals take up a plumbing apprenticeship
- who influences their decision
- where they find information on plumbing apprenticeships
- apprentices' experience with the RTO
- apprentices' experience with employers.



Plumbing apprentices have been and still remain a predominately male-dominated group. Having surveyed over 10% of all apprentices across Australia, less than 1% of current plumbing apprentices are female.

From Plumbing Apprentices:

Understanding why individuals take up a plumbing apprenticeship is an obvious first step to providing underpinning knowledge on how best to attract people into the trade.

Whilst most young people (including plumbing apprentices) may note money as a key reasons for taking up a career, the distinguishing reasons for taking on a plumbing apprenticeship involved *working outdoors*, *working with their hands* and *the opportunity to be their own boss*.

Many of the current plumbing apprentices surveyed did consider other careers before embarking upon their plumbing training. In fact, over half considered other careers - the vast majority of the other careers considered were also in the trades.

² Barriers to National Implementation of BCP03, 2006

Plumbing apprentices' main concerns when embarking upon an apprenticeship are directed at whether they have made the right choice and how to manage the process towards eventual work as a tradesperson. Remote and Regional apprentices were concerned with *handling the training while still working*. This may reflect the distance often travelled to training sites for these two groups and the time commitment to attend training in locations not always convenient. Not surprisingly, mature aged plumbing apprentices had concerns for *family commitments*. Also, for those plumbing apprentices over 39 years of age, the major concern, by far, is whether they will find an employer to do their apprenticeship with.

It is noteworthy that 31% of current plumbing apprentices have '*seriously considered*' dropping out of the apprenticeship training program. For those plumbing students that considered leaving the apprenticeship program, the top rated reasons were: *Apprentice Wages, My boss/employer, I was not enjoying the trade, Saw other jobs I was more suited to, The cost of tools and training*.

Wages appear to dominate the concerns of plumbing apprentices. Without disputing this fact, it should be noted that few apprentices appear to view their apprenticeship wages as subsidised training.

It appears that those who take up plumbing apprentices are most often surrounded by people who are encouraging and supportive in their choice. In choosing to take up a plumbing apprenticeship, individuals have been most heavily influenced by: *others in the trades* (41%), along with *parents and family* (38%).

Finding information on Apprenticeships is critical when individuals are considering a career path. When first considering a plumbing apprenticeship, 83% of current plumbing apprentices surveyed found it was *very easy* or *fairly easy* to find information. Only 17% had some difficulty in finding information.

When first looking into a plumbing apprenticeship, respondents felt the best sources of information were:

1. *other plumbers* (33%)
2. *internet* (14%)
3. *RTOs* (13%)
4. *parents* (11%).



Those sources of information on plumbing apprenticeships that were most frustrating for plumbing apprentices surveyed were: Internet (29%), Recruitment Agency (16%), TAFE/RTOs (16%), and Australian Apprenticeship Centres (13%).

On the role of Secondary School Career Advisors, over half of the apprentices surveyed found they received good information on the trades in general. However, 24% of surveyed plumbing apprentices found that *knowledge of the plumbing trade as a career* was poor or very poor.

Despite general satisfaction on careers advisors' overall performance on encouraging trades, there is still some predilection within the system to encourage University education over apprenticeships. There were also comments that inferred that trades were a fall-back position for those that weren't 'smart enough' for University. This certainly brings into question whether people are directed into plumbing apprenticeships because they are well suited to the career or because they are perceived as 'not good enough' to get into university.

On feedback regarding the training organisations, plumbing apprentices are generally satisfied with the flexibility and services of current plumbing training organisations. Within their training, current plumbing apprentices appeared to enjoy *learning and experiencing new skills* that would *provide a trade for life*. Notably different from their city counterparts, those from remote areas seemed to also enjoy: *Fellow apprentices in my group/class* and *Meeting new people*.

Although plumbing apprentices are generally satisfied with their current RTO, many suggested improvements, including:

- *Better workshops, supplies and tools*
- *Better availability of sessions*
- *Reduce the number of breaks while at school*
- *Better communication and planning of timetables*
- *Quicker course pace*
- *Increase the amount of hands-on practical work*
- *Better access to teachers during projects, assessments and class.*



In regards to apprenticeship training at RTOs, apprentices from remote areas listed travel time as their highest concern. Mature aged apprentices were much more concerned with *too much slack time while at school*.

In feedback regarding their apprenticeship employer, overwhelmingly, plumbing apprentices found their employers flexible in supporting apprentices.

When asked what aspects they enjoy most about their work the two highest responses were *learning a life skill/career* and *hands-on experience*. Plumbing apprentices from remote areas tended to rate *the people I work with* much higher than those from town and city. Interestingly, mature aged plumbing apprentices tended to enjoy *the variety of work* more, but were less enamoured with *working outdoors*.

On the topic of work experience, apprentices least enjoy: *Being left alone to do jobs I don't fully understand*, *Being treated without respect*, *Long hours*, *Not getting experience in all streams of plumbing*.

From Employers:

Employers of plumbing apprentices were also surveyed because of their critical role in the apprenticeship training scheme. They were queried about their perceptions on information sources and training organisations.

For their needs, employers feel the best source of information on plumbing apprenticeships come from: the Master Plumbers Associations (45%), Australian Apprenticeship Centres (29%), and friends in the trade (24%).

One quarter of all employers surveyed have had some difficulty in sourcing information on Australian Plumbing Apprenticeships. This is slightly higher for employers from remote or regional areas (i.e. 31%).

The top three sources of information most frustrating to employers were: *TAFE or other plumbing training schools*, *Australian Apprenticeship Centres*, and *Recruitment Agencies*.

Almost half of employers feel they do not get enough information from training organisations in regards to their apprentices.

Employers perceived that the training organisation was not very flexible. Employers were most concerned with training times and their impact on apprentice work.

Employers were asked to comment on what they would do differently, if they were running the plumbing training organisation. They offer the following:

- Better communication
- Involving employers more in training
- Greater flexibility in training times
- Maintaining currency in training content
- Reduce waiting times to enrol apprentices

In asking employers what the greatest challenges were in keeping a plumbing apprentice throughout the training, they provided:

- Generating the variety of work needed
- Low wages for apprentices
- Encouraging a healthy work ethic
- Keeping them interested and focused on finishing the Apprenticeship

From Plumbing Lecturers

Plumbing lecturers were also surveyed because of their pivotal role in providing apprentices the structured learning environment for a lifetime career in the plumbing industry.

Plumbing lecturers believed the greatest challenges they faced with 1st Year plumbing apprentices included: LL&N difficulties, lack of hand skills and the difficulty for many apprentices to transition to the adult learning environment. Further, many commented on the lack of time to properly deliver the training requirements within BCP03 and emphasise the theory components with apprentices who were more interested in practical work.

Australian Apprenticeships continue to evolve in an attempt to meet the ever growing demand for skills in the trades. However, this requires a vigilant focus on the changing drivers and impediments within the system. This report focuses on the specific feedback presented by current plumbing apprentices, employers and lecturers. Their feedback provides a wealth of information to enhance and improve the take-up of Australian Apprenticeships and further improve trade training.



